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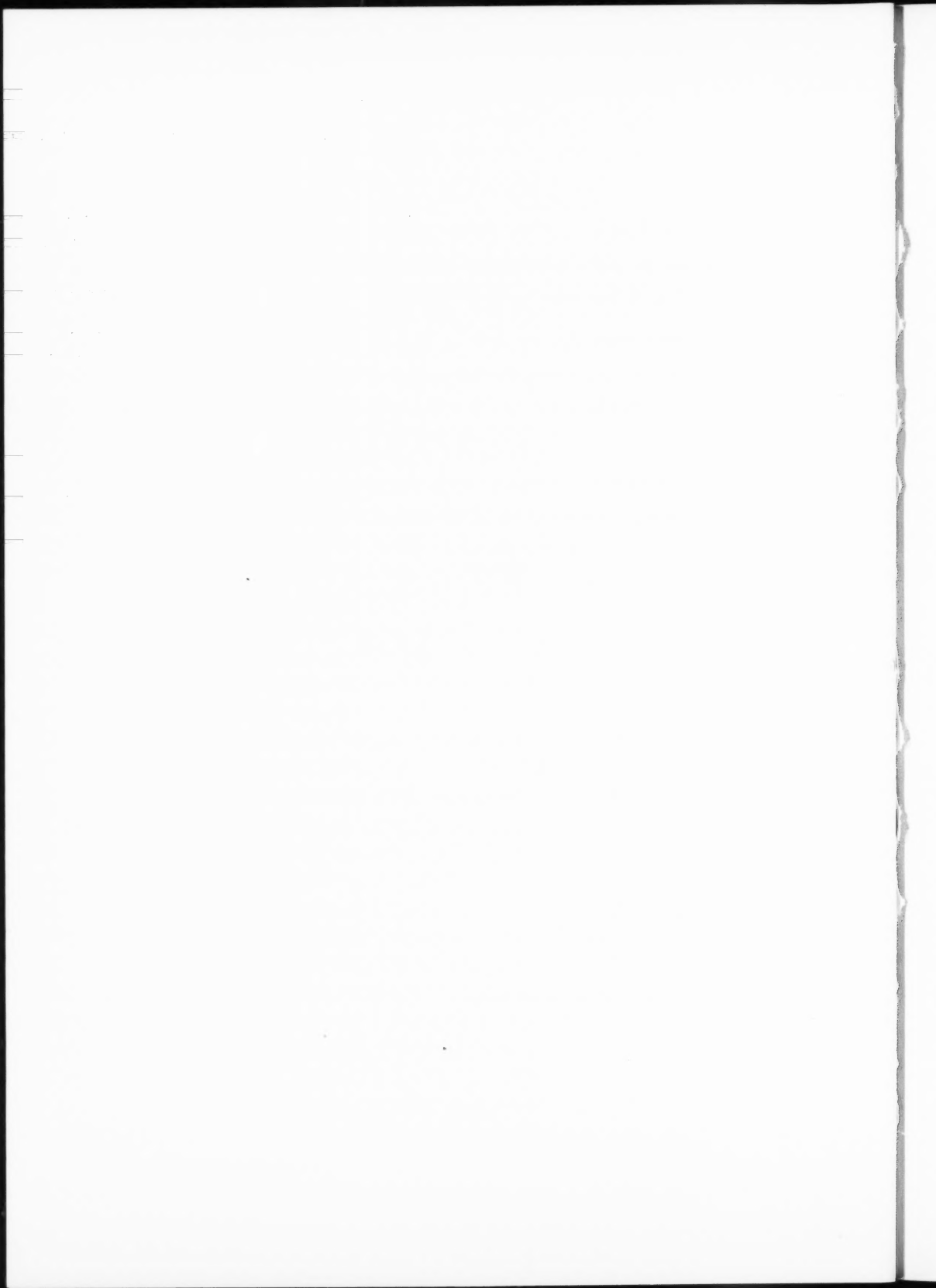
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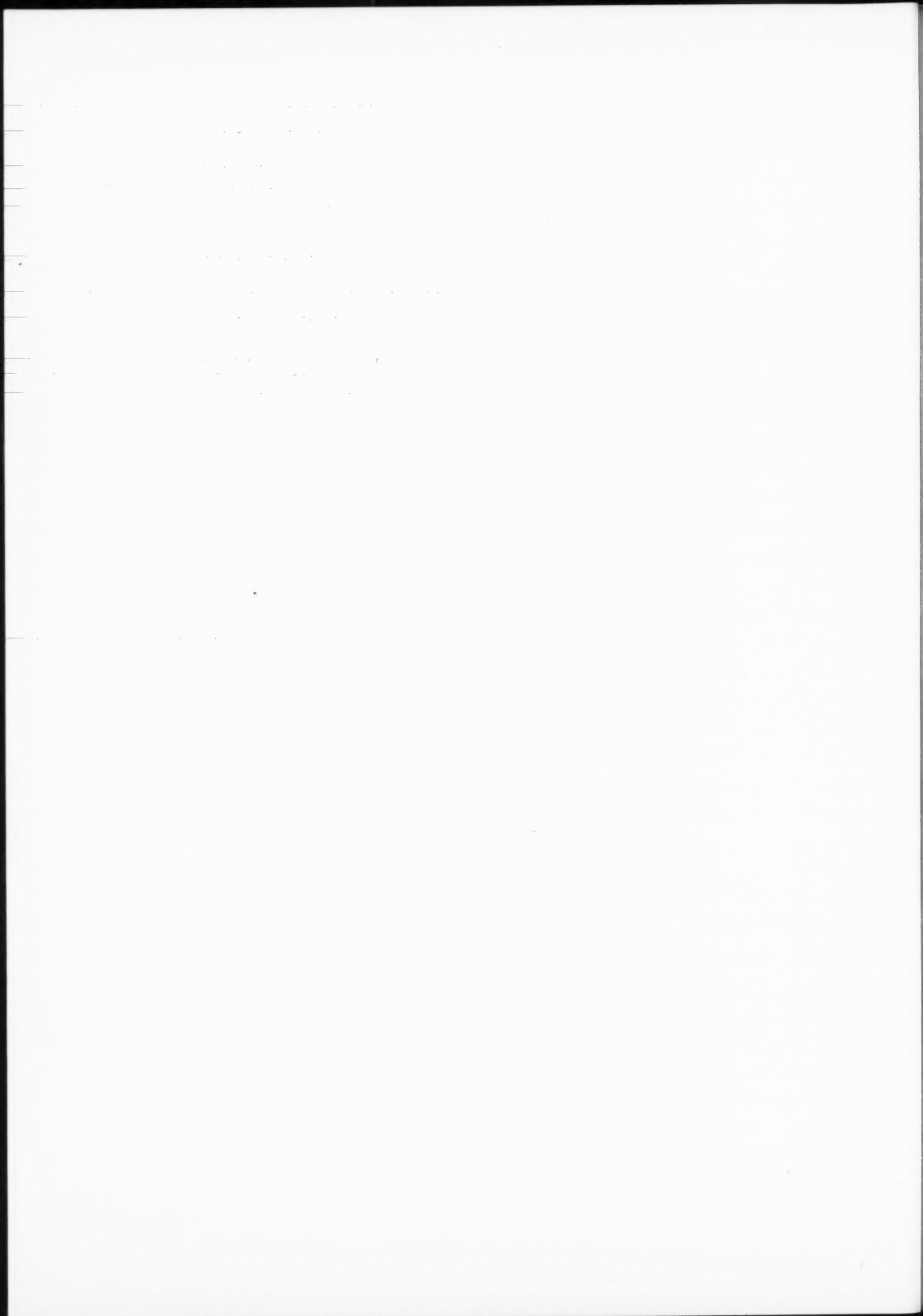
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POETRY AND MUSIC; MUSICAL INTERPRETATION; AND SOME  
REMARKS ABOUT AMERICAN ORCHESTRAS

BY SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY



## POETRY AND MUSIC; MUSICAL INTERPRETATION; AND SOME REMARKS ABOUT AMERICAN ORCHESTRAS

BY SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY

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Of all the arts, music and poetry are pre-eminently those that may be brought into closest union with one another. Such a connection is surely well founded, for, at the beginning, poetry and music formed a united and indivisible whole. In remote times they existed in a united and indivisible tonal art, and their separation took place rather late. One cannot, on a sound basis, consider painting as the mother of poetry, or affirm that literature gave birth to architecture. To admit that, would seem—if not an obvious absurdity—in any case, a great paradox. But, if we make a parallel between poetry and music, the situation changes. Between these two arts there is an extraordinary relationship and an astonishing nearness. One may follow the rise of poetry out of music or consider the inverse: the birth of music from poetry. Both modern philology and modern musical research agree that once poetry and music formed one art and dwelt in the midst of one united element.

The disjunction of poetry and music happened a long time ago, and each of these arts led its own existence and developed independently of the other; but their passionate attraction remained forever. Poetry always longs to be united to music, so that it tries from time to time to become music. This was the case with the symbolist poets (*"De la musique avant toute chose"*—Verlaine).

It is easy to bring together music and poetry. Both have one aim, if we recall the poet's words:

"Go on and hasten  
To fill again my hungry soul  
With music."

—Pushkin, "Mozart and Salieri"

However, we do not intend to make a parallel between the two arts in order to talk about their common features, but in order to distinguish one fundamental peculiarity which divides them: poetry is silent music. Its meaning is in the unexpressed and untold. Music is the singing voice of poetry.

This is the real reciprocal relation between poetry and music. When they are incorporated in concrete works, their relation becomes inverse. As much as they attract each other before their

incarnation into form and images, so much do they repulse each other when taking a literary or tonal shape. This erotic union and disjunction is like a symbol, eternally repeating itself and calling to remembrance the bygone existing unity and the rapture which once occurred.

When poetry incorporates itself into verses, it needs tranquillity: it seems to be ashamed of its literary nudity and demands silence. On the contrary, music, when taking a concrete shape, appears to be chained by quietness and violently claims to be expressed in real tones. Only bad verses aspire to be pronounced, playing with the sonority of words; good verses are fond of stillness and silence. In music, we observe the opposite phenomenon; only bad music is hostile to its tonal expression—that is, music which contents itself with its outlines (*"Papiermusik"*). Good music requires to be unchained in reproduction. Recited poetry nearly always sounds rhetorical. Good verses must be read to oneself.

Music which does not sound appears to be a dead world and loses its significance; its meaning dwells only in the tonal realization. Verses which are not even read (let alone not pronounced) do not lose their active power, but keep, in a mysterious manner, the ascendancy of poetry. Goethe and Petrarch do not lose their power and strength, but are independent of the fact whether they are remembered and read.

Music gave birth to the art of interpretation, creating in its own sphere a second and auxiliary art, which poetry does not know at all. In poetry, interpretation is very artificial and changes into a dramatic pose—a pose because it appears an imitation of theatrical art, from which poetical interpretation must borrow, for, in poetry's own sphere, as an organic art, it cannot arise. As an auxiliary art, interpretation is, above all, most closely connected with music.

The realm of interpretation in music, and especially the realm of conducting, is still very young, when we think that Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Wagner, who appeared about the same time as the leading conductors of their epoch, were, indeed, the first conductor-interpreters. In fact, they founded a new school. I believe that

Wagner was the very first conductor who turned his back to the audience when leading an orchestra. Before him, the conductors stood *à trois quart* facing the public. You may well imagine what little influence a conductor could have on the orchestra, standing with his back to the musicians. But, as I said, at that time the art of interpretation in conducting was not known. The conductors were mostly 'time-beaters' who did not even trouble to rehearse, letting the concert-master rehearse in their stead. Hence, originated the word 'concert-master.' The performance consisted in playing in time, without any consideration to details or perfection. If there was in the orchestra a virtuoso player, and if he had a solo passage to play, he performed his musical phrase with the utmost individuality, disregarding the whole conception of the work, its general meaning or line.

Wagner and Mendelssohn created a real revolution in the sphere of conducting. They no longer 'beat time'; they built up the musical phrase. Yet this, of course, was far from the modern art of conducting. The geniuses of Wagner and Mendelssohn were totally opposite: Wagner was essentially romantic; Mendelssohn essentially constructive. I would say that Mendelssohn's art of conducting is nearer to our day than the art of Wagner, because Mendelssohn's approach to musical compositions is more abstract than Wagner's approach. I would remark that in their time almost the entire young generation followed Wagner, not Mendelssohn, because Wagner reflected his epoch immeasurably more than did Mendelssohn.

It is also interesting to mark the difference of their conceptions of musical compositions. For example, I will take works well known to all of you to show the different renditions of Wagner and Mendelssohn as far as their traditions have reached me. I shall demonstrate:<sup>1</sup>

Allegretto Scherzando from Beethoven's Symphony No. 8:

The tempo of Wagner.

The tempo of Mendelssohn.

Weber, Overture to "Freischütz":

The tempo of Wagner.

The tempo of Mendelssohn.

Which of the two was right?—we can not say.

<sup>1</sup> At this point, passages from the two works were played upon the piano. Mendelssohn's interpretation was shown as faster, more rigid and precise; Wagner's as freer and more emotionally expressive in phrasing.

Here we actually come to the problems of interpretation. Before the World War, interpretative art was strongly influenced by the romantic school. That is, the interpreter regarded a musical composition as an artist-painter would regard a landscape: to him it is an 'aspect of nature.' He takes that 'aspect of nature' and reflects it as he sees, feels, and understands it. Therefore, one and the same landscape in the hands of two artists will have a different reflection. Also the form of one and the same object will be given different lights and shadings.

In all ages, artists were prophets of either the rise or downfall of a culture. In the pre-war period, leading artists introduced decadence into art before it manifested itself in the social and political life of the post-war period. Decadence in musical interpretation in some countries grew to such proportions that not only were the lights and shadings distorted, but the form itself was lost. At the same time, artists in other countries, also instinctively foreseeing that decline, attempted to straighten the distorted line of classical art.

We have a great deal of evidence, however, that musical performers have a right to interpret compositions freely. They hold that right from the composer. Take Bach, for example. In his works we very often find no nuances. Does it mean that Bach intended to have his compositions played without nuances? Positively no. The great Bach leaves that freedom to the performer. Take the classical concertos by Mozart and Beethoven: we find that cadenzas are very rarely written by the composer, who leaves the freedom of improvisation to the performer. In Wagner's scores, after "Tänhauser" and "Lohegrin," we find no exact indication of tempi. Wagner omitted it intentionally, and says in his book on the art of conducting that it is unnecessary to mark the exact tempo, because a talented conductor will find the right tempo anyway; and the untalented conductor will never grasp the tempo even if it is printed in the score. For that reason, Wagner marks his tempi in a general way, such as: "Bewegt," "Massig bewegt," slower, faster, and so on.

I recall a personal experience with the most outstanding contemporary composer, Jean Sibelius. When I studied his Fourth Symphony for a performance here, I found that the tempo of the last 98 bars of the scherzo was marked twice as slow as the preceding tempo,—and that I could neither feel nor understand. I wrote to Sibelius



asking for an explanation, thinking that it was a possible misprint and saying I did not feel that tempo. And Sibelius answered: "The right tempo is the one that the artist feels." Where is, after all, the truth of interpretation, and how can an artist justify that truth?

Personally, I believe that a composer, when creating a work, transfuses it not only with his musical power, but also with the entire meaning of his life—the essence of his being. That is why we can and we must find a 'central line' in the creation of every composer. What is the central line of a composer? It is the meaning of his life and ideals, which he brings to us through the medium of his music.

With Bach, the central line is religion. Bach came to glorify God. And we find in his entire life his praise of God, exaltation of heaven and divinity. Haydn's line is joyfulness, humour, which he wants to share with others. We feel it in every symphony, in every minuet and allegro. Mozart gives us pure tonal harmony; absolute purity of musical form. If we analyse his creative work, we will find how free Mozart was of any outward influence: he believed in music for the sake of music, sound for sound, beauty for beauty. Let us take Beethoven. His central line is transcendentalism: he reflects universal emotion in music. When Beethoven grieves, he grieves with the world; when Beethoven is joyful, it is universal joy; when he feels a tragedy, it is a world tragedy. We can well say that the central line of Beethoven's art is the unifying element of universality. I shall not overburden you by enumerating other composers. But I cannot go by an outstanding figure in musical art—Wagner. The central line of Wagner's art is love and devotion, which we can trace in all his creative work: Love and devotion of Senta in the "Flying Dutchman"; of Elizabeth in "Tannhäuser"; of King Mark to Isolde; of Isolde and Kurwenall to Tristan. And so, we can find in the work of each master a central line expressed in sound.

Here emerges the truth of interpretative art. When the artist-interpreter is able to perceive the inner meaning, the central line, of a composition, he will find in himself the right and illuminating emotion to perform it. It may not be difficult to trace externally the central line, because there exists a vast literature of the life and activity of every composer, especially those belonging to history. It is not difficult for a musician to analyse a score externally, to determine its form,

its melodic and harmonic plan, and entire structure. But this only takes us half way; this is only the surface part of the central line, which will give us no true understanding of the depth and emotion of this or the other work or composer. The most important part is that which can neither be read nor learned; it rests in the interpreter himself, in his own emotions, depth, and feeling.

Today, we often hear 'musical authorities' declare, when discussing a performance: "Let music speak for itself." That up-to-date motto is dangerous, because it paves the way for mediocre performers to come and accurately play over a composition from beginning to end, claiming that they "let the music speak for itself." That argument is also not correct because a talented artist, no matter how accurately he follows the markings in the score, renders the composition through his own prism, his own perception of the score, his own temperament and emotion. And the deeper the emotion of the interpreter, the greater and more vivid the performance.

A perfect interpretation may have two different aspects, equally faithful to the score of the composer. One may be called mechanically perfect; the other organically perfect. The first gives the beauty of mathematical balance, symmetry, and clarity; the second is the indivisible, living, pulsating *élan vital* of the composition. One aims to present a beautified surface or reflection of the composition. In the other, the composition—its central idea—lives as a reality. One may be compared to a perfectly symmetrical building; the other to a great Gothic cathedral, with its partly asymmetrical, yet organic order of unity. One is always enjoyable, pleasant and delightful, but remains, like a beautiful scene, external to the listener. The other takes and carries him with the *élan vital* of the work, merges him with the reality of the central meaning, makes him co-live and co-experience the *élan vital* of the composition. Like a mystic experience, the organic interpretation puts the listener in direct touch with the absolute reality hidden in the great work.

Approaching further the question of orchestral performance, I must say that at no time has the standard of musical performance been set as high as it is in America today. This is not a mere verbal statement: facts speak for themselves. In Europe, even in the best of the old days, the symphony orchestras had not nearly the same

possibilities as we have here. Nor was there the same intensity of work and interest. I shall take, for example, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the oldest in Europe. How many concerts did that orchestra give in the course of one season under the leadership of a great conductor? In its most brilliant period, the Berlin Philharmonic gave ten concerts with Nikisch conducting. The remaining concerts were led by different and indifferent conductors. Yet, that was the foremost orchestra of the time. A strikingly interesting period of the musical life of Vienna, which may well be termed 'heroic,' is the period when Gustav Mahler was at the head of the Vienna Opera Orchestra. That same orchestra gave also symphony concerts and was then called "The Philharmonic." However, it was, in the first place, an opera orchestra, the concerts

came in between; there were, perhaps, eight or ten symphony concerts in a season, also conducted by various conductors. The possibilities in America are infinitely better, and give a new idea of orchestral performances.

It is a mistake to think that musical life in America develops only because of America's wealth. This is wrong. Musical life in this country grows because there is the need for music. That need for music today has an explanation: men seek an outlet for their best and deeper emotions, and they find it in music. For, music is the recovered word of true feeling, liberated from the banality, hypocrisy, and cruelty of life. Music is to help the souls of men. It is the pure language, regenerating, like the mountain air.

